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INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE  
RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE  
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE  
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 2070  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 1935  
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 4258  
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 2506  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC  
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 2852  
RHMFIUU/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC  
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC  
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

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SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: NGO ROUNDTABLE REVEALS CONTINUED OBSTACLES  
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY DEVELOPMENT

¶1. (SBU) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

¶2. (SBU) SUMMARY: Deputy Assistant Secretary George Krol's meeting with NGO representatives revealed continued concerns about registration and government attitudes towards civil society activity. Most groups expressed hope that NGOs would be allowed to participate in more areas of Turkmen society, but also noted the challenges which they continue to face. In a surprising side note, attendees seemed to accept fully a Russian media view of Georgian President Saakashvili. END SUMMARY.

¶3. (SBU) On September 2, a group of ten local NGO reps assembled for a roundtable with Deputy Assistant Secretary George Krol in the Embassy's public Information Resource Center. Participants included groups ranging from the International Center for Not for Profit Law (ICNL) to the "Agama" rock-climbing club. After each organization gave a brief overview of its work, DAS Krol asked about challenges and registration issues. Some of the represented NGOs were registered, while others have made various efforts to obtain registration.

¶4. (SBU) All groups who commented expressed frustration with the registration process. Several described bureaucratic difficulties, with their applications for registration being held for months at a time for consideration and then returned for technical errors. Geographic limitations were also raised, as most groups can only register in Ashgabat city or perhaps another locality. The ICNL representative noted that, for the most part, it is the bureaucracy and application process rather than the legal framework that is so terrible. He did point out that the law requires a minimum membership of 500 people for registration as a nationwide organization. He added that such a number is not realistic and attempting to organize that many people would in itself cause possible problems with authorities.

¶5. (SBU) In addition, many NGO reps described the atmosphere of suspicion of any kind of NGO or civil society activity. The organizer of "Charity without Borders," in particular, noted that government officials are suspicious of all groups or activities. She expressed frustration at trying to convince officials that NGO activity is not a threat and could be beneficial for the country.

She emphatically added, "We're not another Saakashvili," to which other NGO reps seemed to nod their heads in agreement. (NOTE: Post sees this as successful Russian media campaigning against the Georgian president, as all NGO reps likely get their international news from Russian satellite TV, despite their pro-Embassy, pro-civil society backgrounds. END NOTE.)

¶6. (SBU) COMMENT: While each group's experience varied, most attendees of the NGO roundtable expressed concern about the obstacles to registration and periodic harassment from government officials. Although the situation has generally improved in Turkmenistan for NGO activity, it is clear that this is still a sector of society in its infancy. END COMMENT.

¶7. (U) DAS Krol cleared this cable.

CURRAN